

Counting Our Cousins

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COUNTING OUR COUSINS

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Mrs. Olney has been a resident of the Des Moines area since 1908. A former school teacher, she earned an A.B. degree from Coe College and a B.S. degree from Iowa State College. She has done reference work and proofreading on several editions of the Iowa Code from 1924 to 1962.

When the Federal Census was taken in 1930, I was the enumerator for Webster Township in Polk county, under the direction of Robert Colflesh who had been appointed by our Congressman, Cassius C. Dowell. Gerald K. Jewett was the assistant director. We enumerators kept in close contact with these men while the work was in progress. My home was in Lovington, a small acreage settlement north of Des Moines, so my work took place outside the county seat.

The work started the second of April, early enough that muddy roads often retarded travel through the country. I had anticipated this, and had planned to travel on horseback, having ridden when homesteading in South Dakota. My mother and young son objected vigorously, however, since I had not been riding recently, so I bought a second-hand Model-T.

It had been several years since I had driven a car. When it was delivered to me, I waited until the dealer left so I could practice in peace. I was really surprised to find it moved. The next morning the car and I started out. We did not have any accidents, despite my inexperience.

I began with Urbandale, expecting to use the money earned there for living expenses during the remainder of the work since none of the salary would be paid until July. The first step when calling at a home, either in town or country, was to secure the population count and related items—race, color, age, sex, place of birth, place of residence, family history, schooling, occupation, marriage, divorce and citizenship—all the data which make up the history of each individual. We also had an employment blank

which furnished a record of employment for both men and women, and listed the unemployed. Another blank was needed for recording the agricultural activities of the farmer.

The questions asked provided for a certain uniformity in our reports, and not many people resented the questions since it was plain others must answer them too. One had to use tact, however, approaching different people in different ways. Perhaps a woman hesitated lest her neighbors learn her mother or father had been born in Russia or Norway. If there had been a divorce in the family, people did not like to mention it. The wife did not want to admit she was older than her husband, or that one of the children had been adopted. In all cases, assurance was given that the enumerator was bound by oath not to repeat any fact from his reports, and that the records were sealed in the Census Bureau so far as any individual's history was concerned.

Sometimes over-cautious men, knowing the enumerator was coming soon, told their wives not to give out any information in their absence. We could not allow our work to be hampered in that way, and we usually found the wife could give all the items to complete the family history. Sometimes a return visit was necessary if only children had been at home on the first call, but often a phone call sufficed.

One might think the newcomers to America would give an enumerator trouble. However, they usually answered gladly as if to show their appreciation of living in America, whether they had become citizens or not. They were most pleased to tell how many children they had in the local school or how many had been graduated. Foreign birth, however, did create questions of citizenship. It was often difficult for the older women to know whether they were actually citizens or not since the men had always represented the family in politics. Also when giving their birthplace, emigrants from localities where names had been changed by war, annexation or treaty, sometimes needed assistance in figuring out the proper 1930 name of the country from which they had come, as our reports required.

The foreign-born woman, knowing her husband understood English so much better than she did, often asked me to call again in the evening. This I did in some cases, to put the women at ease, thus forming a good rapport between them and the government.

Since the census enumeration was dated April 2, but my visit to the neighborhood might have been made later in the month, the Director's office acted as a clearinghouse, providing information about those who had moved into our area but who had been counted elsewhere, and accepting my information about those who had moved away. This practice helped to make sure that every person was counted in his proper area, and especially since farm families often moved at that time of year. I found several families moving in April, and I was glad to count them in our area before they left. This had been their home for some time.

Prior to taking the actual census, the Department of Agriculture had sent out "dummy sheets" to the farmers. These were sample forms showing the farmer what information would be required from *all* American farmers. Therefore, much of the information was ready to be transferred to the official blanks when the enumerator arrived. When I called on them, some farmers, at first, were skeptical about giving facts relative to their farms to a woman, but this attitude wore off gradually, and they cooperated with me in making the reports. The farmers were confronted with a multitude of questions, not all of which applied to any one farm. Iowa reports showed corn, wheat, cattle and hogs as the chief items on most farms.

One hindrance to absolutely correct reports was that many farmers had not kept accurate records of the crops they raised nor the number of cattle, horses and sheep they had. Data covering such items as chicken, eggs, butter or milk gave the most trouble as many men did not think such items deserved regular accounting over a long period. However, the records from co-operatives' milk sales were immensely valuable as they showed the correct totals for monthly sales by each farmer. Individual farms, under expert handling by a master farmer, gave reports far different from the others.

It was generally easier to find the exact acreage given to wheat, oats or corn than to find out how much land was given to garden, strawberries, raspberries or similar items. Yet all these questions were included in our reports. A good guess as to the fraction of an acre in an irregular piece of land provided a usable answer for these small areas.

For smaller acreages, there was often a technical question as to whether they were "census farms" or not. To be within the rank of farm, the profits from the year's crop had to equal at least \$250. Many of these "farms," as well as an occasional larger farm, were within the limits of a town. Small acreages and city lots were reported differently, yet an attempt was made to include all produce.

It was much better to talk to the men in the field when it seemed necessary, than to make a return trip to the farm. When a man was plowing, he generally stopped at the end of a furrow where we could talk about the report, or we could go to the house for his dummy papers, which shortened the time spent on his report.

A difficult question both for rural and town property owners was that of valuation. Owners feared this information was for the assessor. When assured there was no connection with that office, they volunteered to give the needed information. Sometimes, however, we had to use a series of questions and answers to finish the deal.

In the course of the work, I encountered some queer items to report. About the middle of April, I called at a farm home where the farmer's wife had been killed in an accident a few months earlier. A friend of mine, whom I had not seen for sometime, opened the door and introduced herself as the man's wife. They had been married the week before, but my report showed only the man, unmarried, living there on April 2. Again, due to this date, I was compelled to count as living, an old man who had died April 4. In providing his occupation, one man said "boot-legger." Thus it was written down, but he was not reported to the civil authorities. In some cases, homes were guarded by such ferocious dogs they made one shiver. The dogs sometimes expended their energy in their bark, and this

suited me. My territory embraced no "slum districts," but I did use rubber boots in one area and ferreted out a road over some hilly country to get to a few "hillbillies," finding them very happy to be counted in our totals.

Every time I drove to the north portion of my territory, where half of Grimes was included, it rained so hard that the enumeration took more than its proper allotment of time. However, because of the rain, most of the men were indoors, available for the reports. They were expecting my visit!

One very rainy week, my son drove for me. He was convalescing from the measles, and the doctor thought being out-of-doors would help build up his strength before his return to school. These drives gave us a few days to talk about many things as well as experience the size of the township. While enumerating this township, I gained an insight into the magnitude of the entire census project, even if my local work was only a small cog in the immense task of counting the individuals who live in America.

In the entire township, there was only one person, a farmer, who absolutely refused to give any information. I reported him to the District Attorney. Then the U.S. Marshall talked to him after which the farmer talked to me. I was glad he reported to us; otherwise he might have been in trouble.

Following the Webster Township enumeration, I worked for a little over a year in the population division of the Census Bureau where reports from all sections of the country were processed. I met a woman who had taken the count in her township, a mountain district in Utah, where she had also traveled on horseback, and a friend of hers who had worked in a mountain district of West Virginia. We enjoyed sharing our experiences, alike in some ways, so different in others.

When the census representative has come to our home since that time, I know some of the problems he has to face. People must be counted. Everyone has a place in the sun; everyone has an identity.

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